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Transportation Policy Chief Aiming for Higher Efficiency

by Elizabeth G. Book

The transportation of military equipment and supplies to war zones is an elaborate web, and military operators often must trade efficiency for safety, sometimes making soldiers wait for their materials.

For that reason, Pentagon policies that affect the business of defense transportation should be tailored to support and facilitate operations as much as possible, Earl Boyanton told National Defense. As assistant deputy undersecretary of defense for transportation policy, Boyanton said his intent is to ensure that no U.S. troops ever have to ask 'where's my stuff and why can't I get it?'"

Boyanton reports to Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Logistics and Materiel Readiness Diane K. Morales.

Boyanton, who has been in his post since December, said that he would like "to minimize the amount of effort, tracking and oversight that the war fighters have to do to be re-supplied. … Our function is one of policy, rather than operations, but there is a definite linkage, because we want policy to support, or facilitate, our operations."

Before coming to the Pentagon's logistics shop, Boyanton served in the Air Force for nearly 28 years, performing duties in transportation and joint strategic mobility operations. Past assignments include command of operational units and positions within the headquarters staffs of the Military Airlift Command (now Air Mobility Command), Pacific Air Forces, Pacific Command/J4, Joint Staff/J4 and the Air Staff.

After his retirement from the Air Force in 1990, at the rank of colonel, Boyanton worked as a Defense Department contractor for the Transportation Command.

Boyanton is a proponent of strategic mobility programs, including the Civil Reserve Air Fleet and the Voluntary Intermodal Sealift Agreement. These programs employ U.S. and international commercial air and surface transportation in support of military forces in wartime.

The current world situation presents new challenges for the transportation system, he noted. “We have a number of operations going on worldwide,” which require immense logistical support, he said.

“Our goal, through the overall environment of how logistics are done within the department, is to make it as seamless and unobtrusive as possible to the ultimate customer, the war fighter,” Boyanton said.

End-to-End Distribution

Among Boyanton’s projects is a program called future logistics enterprise (FLE), which was instituted by his boss, Diane Morales. Though the FLE has six pillars, Boyanton, with deputy Alan Estevez, exclusively manages the portion referred to as “end-to-end distribution.” This entails “harmonizing and synchronizing the different supply chains that the operational force uses to obtain materials, whether it’s repair parts, food, fuel or ammunition,” Boyanton said.

“The further out in the hinterlands the forces are, the more difficult it is to obtain stuff. The strategic mobility assets, particularly airlift and some sealift, for the past seven or eight months, have been the primary transportation modes,” he said.

“What we’re doing with the end-to-end distribution project, is working with all the stakeholders, and there’s a large number of stakeholders,” Boyanton added.

Among the stakeholders are the manufacturers of the equipment. Most deployed weapons systems are supported and maintained by their manufacturer.

“The original manufacturer, whether it’s Boeing or Lockheed or Raytheon, is actually providing the parts. When the users of that weapons system or that subassembly say they need a replacement part for something that is broken, that order goes directly to the manufacturer, and they figure out how to get it there,” he said.

Deliveries

“If you’re based in Europe or Korea, where you have daily service by Fed Ex and DHL and frequent ocean shipping arrivals, [delivery issues are] pretty invisible to you,” said Boyanton. “But when you get to the far ends of the Earth and you’re in Afghanistan or the Southern Philippines or wherever you might be, now the corporation that manufactures the item has to have other ways to get it there.”

In that case, the manufacturer would rely on the Defense Department’s mobility apparatus, he said.

The Defense Logistics Agency also arranges contracts online called direct vendor delivery, which is a different process than weapons systems support, he said. Products “arrive from a company like Emory Air Freight, as if you had ordered it off the Internet

and it showed up from Amazon.com, which is a great way to do business, particularly to a mature theatre like Europe or Korea," he said.

But, Boyanton noted, more and more often, there are situations where the civilian transportation provider can't get to the destination. "If an operation is going on, sometimes airports aren't open to civilian airplanes," he said.

Boyanton described the complexity of getting supplies to the Afghan theater. "The roads are bad, the bridges are bad, the weather is bad, and the potential for hostilities is there," he said.

The U.S.-led coalition has contracted with Afghan trucking companies, and they are "carrying stuff that was airlifted into one of the bases like Karshi Khanabad or Manas [in Uzbekistan], north of Afghanistan."

These trucks, he said, "are going down roads that are far from a superhighway. There are gravel roads and bridges that have a couple of inches on each side of the tires, and no rails, just a ridge."

Boyanton explained that some shipments come in by sea, through Karachi, Pakistan, usually by large ocean containers, which have to be brought inland to be broken down and distributed to the troops, again by truck. "Within the combat units that are there, there are some organic transportation capabilities, but it's fairly small," he explained.

Boyanton said that the transport capability of deployed troops in Afghanistan differs greatly from places such as Germany, "where the Army has a large transportation group that operates tractor-trailer trucks."

In Afghanistan, he added, "The distribution pipeline has segments to it, where you have hand-offs from one mode to another, where cargo is being brought it from all sorts of sources. There are hand-offs from intermediate staging bases, where cargo is being brought in from commercially contracted 747s, C-5s, C-17s, and there's still a few 141s flying."

After being staged somewhere, C-17s and C-130s pick up the cargo "and take it on into country, which has proved to be a more efficient operation than flying C-17s all the way back to the U.S. to pick up, because they're more valuable landing in Afghanistan," he said. "I've been told it's a more optimal use of the critical assets, the C-17s and C-130s, by shuttling them between an intermediate staging base and the destination," Boyanton said.

The current environment in Afghanistan does not lend itself to efficient transportation practices, because regional hostilities have raised safety concerns.

"You'll have a container load of some sort of commodity, from a German port like Bremerhaven, which would be moved over land all the way around though part of Russia

and down into Afghanistan. If you looked at a map, you'd say that that is the most convoluted way to get cargo somewhere you ever saw. But sometimes more direct routes are unavailable and you have to go the long way around," he said.

In the Afghan theater, Gen. Tommy Franks, of the Central Command, controls the airfield and can say who can come in and who can't. Commercial aircraft, at times, have been barred. At certain times, "The airfields were in no condition to take 747s. I don't think they said, arbitrarily, you can't bring in any commercials, but they were very carefully controlled," Boyanton said.

"The airlift fleet of our strategic mobility force structure has certainly been the focus throughout Operation Enduring Freedom, and the aerial refueling side has excelled also. The C-17, in particular, by all reports, is holding up very well and doing exactly what it was built to do," Boyanton said.

"It's been a great airplane, and Gen. [John] Handy [the commander of U.S. Transportation Command] has been outspoken on the need to obtain more. That hasn't been budgeted yet, but the Department has said they would be willing to go up to 180 C-17s, and he's saying he needs a minimum of 222," Boyanton said.

"On the sealift side, we rely on our commercial ocean transportation industry in large part," he said.

"The Military Sealift Command has been working, not very visibly, in collaboration with the Defense Energy Support Center, which is part of DLA, to move fuel around by ocean out in the Middle East area—whether it's from the Horn of Africa over toward Diego Garcia, or up into Pakistan. A lot of fuel going into central Afghanistan has been air delivered. The dry cargo (everything from bullets to bombs and food) has moved by sealift as well as airlift," said Boyanton.

The Military Traffic Management Command works with DLA and the Military Sealift Command to coordinate sea-based transportation.